DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 167 SO 023 770

AUTHOR Dorman, William A.
TITLE Beyond Reason: The Media, Politics, and Public Discourse. Draft.
PUB DATE 11 Aug 92
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Conference for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique (12th, Rohnert Park, CA, August 11, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Broadcast Journalism; *Critical Thinking; *Current Events; Higher Education; *Mass Media Role; *News Media; Political Science; *Popular Culture; Public Opinion
IDENTIFIERS *Topic Selection

ABSTRACT

The media have a lot to do with how people think and what people think about. The line between popular culture and news has virtually disappeared, giving rise to what some have labeled "infotainment." At the same time, "fake news" in the form of publicity that promoters provide to media outlets under the guise of legitimate news stories has become more common. If the media immerse people in a sea of images and sensation, can critical thinking survive? In the contemporary culture, the media present information as if everything has equal significance. Furthermore, news outlets present information in disjointed, seemingly unrelated bits. The framing of the news, the context in which the news appears, also bears examination. For instance, news reports tend to present stories about poverty as stories about individuals. The result is that citizens blame individuals for poverty, rather than blaming the system. A final problem involves emphasis. News reports tend to focus on violence, which tends to increase disproportionately public fear of violence. Teachers can promote students' critical thinking by challenging media assumptions, and by demonstrating how the media can trivialize public policy issues. Under these circumstances, American society should be more modest than to assume that the United States is the best informed and, therefore, the most democratic country in the world. (SG)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 379 167

# "Beyond Reason: The Media, Politics and Public Discourse"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
WILLIAM A DORMAN
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Prof. William A. Dorman
Journalism/ Peace & Conflict Studies
California State University, Sacramento

Tuesday, August 11, 1992

***This is a Draft***

***Please Do Not Quote Without Author's Permission***

Twelfth Annual International Conference for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique

Sonoma State University



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

SO 023 772

"Beyond Reason: The Media, Politics

and Public Discourse"

Let me begin by outlining my assumptions, intentions, plans and hopes for this afternoon's session. My *assumption* is that most of you are interested in teaching about the political system in some way or another, particularly in an election year. My *intention* is to use the current presidential campaign as an excuse to make some distinctions and delineations about mass media and political discourse in this country that I think frequently get lost when we talk about such matters. My *plan* is to spend the first part of this session talking **at** you to lay a groundwork for talking **with** you during the second part. Finally, my *hope* is that you will take some of the ideas, concepts and strategies that come out of this session back into the classroom this fall and use them in your consideration of the political process.

The genesis for this presentation was a panel I was asked to participate on this spring dealing with the press, politics and the election. It was the first time in a long while that I had thought systematically about the subject, and I soon discovered that over the years I had come to hold much different concerns about the press and politics than I thought I did. I've noticed a lot of that recently as I get older--the realization that I no longer am quite certain that I agree with many of the things I believe.

In any event, for a teacher of critical thinking, particularly one dealing with political affairs, there can be no more important concern than for the quality of public discourse. By discourse, of course, I mean any communication of thought by words, talk, conversation--or even more broadly, any exchange of meaning using symbols. These conversations about public matters are precisely what make the public realm possible, and without a public realm, civil society can not exist.

Clearly, the theme of this year's conference, dealing as it does with cultivating the reasoning mind, has everything to do with teaching about public discourse. Without high intellectual standards applied routinely to public debate of public issues, the citizen quickly becomes little more than a subject whose prospects are wholly determined in undemocratic ways. It is the desperate need to halt the undermining on such intellectual standards that in my judgment is the most pressing task for teachers at any level, and which provides of the thrust of my remarks today.

Let me get to the point quickly. I've had occasion to spend a lot of time studying what the literature has to say about the effects of mass media on public opinion particularly where political matters are concerned. I've also spent a considerable amount of time looking at what is called Agenda Setting Theory. This is the theory, put simply, that the mass media have quite a bit to do with WHAT we think about. I've also spent time looking at Frame Analysis theory, which studies the media effect on HOW we think about matters of public consequence.

I'm not going to go into detail about what the sum of these academic studies other than to say that they have convinced me of the truth of what any sensible ninth grader had already come to conclude: The mass media have a lot to do with how we think and what we think about. If you're interested in reading further about such matters, particularly in how the mass media influence thinking about political issues, see me afterwards and I'll give you the names of a couple of books. (Shanto Iyengar: Is Anyone Responsible: How Television Frames Political Issues, and News That Matters, Iyengar and Donald Kinder).

Now that I've gotten the academic stuff out of the way in what I think must reasonably be considered record time, what about the media's performance in the 1992 election, which seems to be the central concern of a great many people, at least judging from the number of letters to the editor, academic conferences, talk shows and so on that are devoted to the subject.

Obviously, if you haven't been accidentally locked in a garage for the last six months and been completely out of touch, you will know that there has been great controversy over how the media have handled Bill Clinton's love life and smoking habits, Jerry Brown's other-worldly qualities, Ross Perot's all too temporary transformation into Jimmy Stewart, and Dan Quayle's ability to spell and capacity for serious thought. Most recently, the incumbent, George Bush, has begun to take his twenty whacks at the press.

My first point this afternoon about all of this is that concern about the performance of the press during political campaigns is absolutely nothing new. Nor is dismay at the level or quality of **political discourse** in an election year.

Perhaps the most eloquent and important defender of the role of the press in an open society was Thomas Jefferson. Yet after long public service, here's what he had to say about the press in 1807: "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle." (Weymouth, 1973, p. 149) This is not a happy camper.

And what of the campaign of 1828? Andrew Jackson's supporters began the fun by publishing the charge that the incumbent John Quincy Adams, while serving as minister to Russia, had procured a young American woman for Czar Alexander I.

According to one historian, Jackson was reduced to tears when a newspaper supporting Adams struck back with the charge that Stonewall's mother was "a common prostitute, brought to this country by the British soldiers." Certainly, Henry Clay in his 1844 contest with Martin Van Buren must have found little to be pleased with in a Democratic pamphleteer's charges that he "spent his days at the gambling table and his nights in a brothel." (Both anecdotes taken from Boller, 1984) I would submit that by these standards, Bill Clinton should count himself lucky.

Then there are those commentators who bemoan the coming of the age of the soundbite. To be sure, politician's statments on television are indeed getting shorter and shorter. In just the last decade, between 1980 and 1989, the average political news soundbite on the evening network news declined from 43.8 to 8.8 seconds. (Figure given the author by Prof. Daniel C. Hallin, U.C. San Diego, an authority on the subject) Aside from the question of how much difference thirty five seconds really makes in reasoned discourse, I must remind you that there is little significant difference between today's soundbites and the simplistic campaign slogans of the early 19th century. In this regard, "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" was merely the precursor of "Read My Lips."

And what of the claim that the media's concentration on trivial issues drive out those of substance? Go back and look at the vaunted television debates between Kennedy and Nixon. What you'll find is much uproar over Quemoy and Matsu, which most voters probably mistook for a pair of Sumo wrestlers, but in fact were two tiny islands a few miles off the Chinese mainland occupied by Nationalist troops and supposedly vitally important to the security of the world. Who's heard of them since?

So, is Professor Dorman telling us, Not to worry. We've been down this road before and everything will work out okay in the end? Well, not exactly.

What I am suggesting is that I think we need to be careful in saying what is distinctively shallow, sordid and ill-informed about today's political discourse and its relationship to the mass media--and what is not. Otherwise there will be those who argue there is no real cause for alarm; things have always been this way and therefore always shall.

I've already touched on what is not new. Let me turn to what I think is different about media and politics today--and why it may matter.

Put as simply as I can, what is different today is that public discourse in general has become almost completely *dysfunctional*--not just during election campaigns, but year in and

year out. Remember, for many Americans living in pre-media America, political campaigns were almost a form of sport. But from my reading of history, discourse could still be divided into different realms, and serious minded people could at least tell the difference between what was trivial and that which truly mattered. I'm not so certain how possible this is today. As a result, the currency of reasonableness has been seriously devalued. Let me try and explain.

The primary problem with today's discourse about things that matter is rooted in the reality that the line between popular culture and news has virtually been erased. I trace the beginning of this erasure back a long time, at least to the beginnings of film in this country and the coming of an industry that for the first time in human history perfected the mass production of fantasy for profit. Actually, as one perceptive critic has noted, movies at one time were "stimulants to heroic-romantic imaginings," but this was before "television converted moving images into visual tranquilizers," in his phrase, that is to say, "pain and time killers sold over the airwaves without prescription."(Schickel, 1990)

Increasingly, we have come to be commanded by an image oriented culture, which is dominated by television, videos, advertising images and so on. Only one result may be, in the words of social critic Neal Postman, that we are amusing ourselves to death. (Postman, 1985)

Consider if you will how all matter of things, whether consequential or inconsequential, are now run through the media's cultural cuisnart and ooze forth in the form of what some have called ***infotainment***. Ask my freshman and sophomore students to name a prominent news program, and likely as not, they'll respond "Entertainment Tonight," "Current Affair," "Hard Copy" or "Geraldo." But before you condemn them for youthful sloth and intellectual indolence, look at the models they've been raised with, say, in local television news programming, with its emphasis on the happy talk format, interviews with celebrities, and weather people who are selected for their "presence" rather than meteorological credentials.

Or take the example of the major conflict of their young lives, the Gulf War, which was presented by television virtually as a mini-series, a "Lonesome Dove" with missiles. In his superb new book, "Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War," John R. MacArthur argues that "never before had carefully designed electronic imagery so dominated the coverage of a conflict. Vietnam-era film of actual fighting would look crude and old-fashioned alongside the slick production values of [Operation Desert Storm]." He concluded that such imagery "harmonized perfectly with the Pentagon's plans to hide the killing." Actually, we will probably never again see warfare in the same way as we did in Vietnam, at least if the Pentagon has its way. As one British military office said about the press and the gulf, the problem today is that "blood looks so red on television."

As if the problem of infotainment were not serious enough, there is also the development in broadcast journalism of what *TV Guide* called "Fake News." (Liberman, 1992) This involves the production of video press releases by public relations firms, who supply them to television stations and even to the networks, which in turn slip them into newscasts without any notice. I happened to be speaking on the same panel at a conference with a producer of these video releases, who proudly announced that some 100 TV stations had used his firm's "good news" video release on the "positive steps" Palm Springs was taking to handle the problems of Spring Break. His other clients include corporations ranging from General Motor and Nestle Beverage company to Princess Cruises and the Walt Disney Company. He showed outtakes from some of his releases, and I must say they looked exactly as if an independent news crew had produced them.

Another practice that is on the rise because of cost-cutting moves in network news is taking a tape made by freelancers in some trouble spot and having a reporter back home provide the voice-over. Unless a viewer knows what subtle clues to look for, the obvious conclusion is that the reporter doing the voice-over actually covered the story. (CJR, 1992)

Concerns about Fake news aside, the main problem for me remains that realms of discourse are no longer as clearly distinguished as they once were--and entertainment merges in all ways with serious discussion. Such a confusion could not come at a more serious time, as there is ample evidence that our major institutions are imploding, and we are in desperate need of clear heads.

Bill Moyers wrote of the consequences of the failure of discourse in a *New York Times* op-ed piece this past spring, which he began:

> "Americans can turn on a series called 'Real Sex' and watch a home striptease class on HBO. Or they can flip to NBC news and get 'I Witness Video' where they can see a policeman's murder recorded in his cruiser's camcorder, watch it replayed, complete with ominous music. Or they can see the video of a pregnant woman plunging from a blazing building; they can see it several times, at least once in slow motion."

He tells us that in place of the old hard news culture is something called New News, which the hip magazine *Rolling Stone* has described as a "heady concoction, part Hollywood film and TV, part pop music and pop art, mixed with popular culture and celebrity magazines, tabloid telecasts, and so on." (Katz, 1992)

What does it matter if such a culture replaces the old? According to Moyers, once newspapers drew people to the public square. They provided a culture of community conversation by activating inquiry on serious public issues. According to Moyers, "When the press abandons that function, it no longer stimulates what John Dewey termed the 'vital habits' of democracy--the ability to follow an argument, grasp the point of view of another, debate the alternative purposes that might be pursued."

I like that phrase, the vital habits of democracy.

I think such habits are precisely what Richard Paul calls for when he talks about internalizing intellectual standards. It is precisely those habits of democracy that ought to be the center of concern today for any teacher of critical thinking, election year or not.

If Americans are immersed in a sea of images and an ocean of sensation, as there is every reason to believe they are, how are they encouraged to reason logically, or worry about the connection between evidence, premises and conclusions? How can critical thinking survive, let alone thrive?

Put another way, popular culture as a form of discourse today simply is not presented in the form of an argument, cogent or otherwise. Therefore, how can we test it for truth, as critical thinking suggests we ought to be able to. Is a Big Mac Attack true or false? Is Boyz N' Hood a documentary? Should USA Today win a Pulitzer Prize for investigative weather? Here's one observer on the descent of serious journalism into the depths of happy talk: "We are in the process of creating what deserves to be called the idiot culture. Not an idiot sub-culture, which every society has bubbling beneath the surface and which can provide harmless fun; but the culture itself." This, incidentally, from Carl Bernstein, of Woodward/Bernstein Watergate fame.

I've heard it said that the greatest service a historian can perform is to provide us with a usable past. I would say of journalists that the greatest service they can perform is to provide us with a usable present. I fear for an open society if they fail in this task.

All of which leads to a second problem with contemporary media culture that involves what a teacher of critical thinking will immediately recognize as the fallacy of lack of proportion. The problem here is that Information, whether political or not, is presented by the media to the citizenry as if everything were of equal significance. A prime example is a talk show described by Postman whose host announced before the commercial break: "Stay tuned. Coming up is word about a new diet-- and a quick look at incest." I think it is precisely this lack of proportion, for instance, that leads a surprising number of my students to argue that Devil worship and Satanism is a national problem on par with AIDS, or drugs, or the homeless.

For instance, where is the proportion in equating the Congressional check bouncing scandal, which involved no public funds, with the Savings and loan debacle, which may involve up to a half a trillion? How is it that people come to see welfare fraud on the same level as Pentagon fraud?

A fourth problem has to do with how the news media present the news. Take the dimension of fragmentation, which simply means that news is served up to us in disjointed, seemingly unrelated fragments or bits of information. Each day, we are confronted with hundreds of pieces of a puzzle, but rarely are we given a look at the picture on the box top so we can begin solving it. For instance, the news media treat each economic or political catastrophe as an anomaly rather than as a warning or sign of the system's weakness.

What do I mean by fragmentation? How about the local television reporter who called me not once but three times a couple of months ago, pleading that I do a just a quick sound bite, fifteen or 20 seconds, no more, on the journalistic ethics of forcing tennis star Arthur Ashe to go public about having the HIV virus. Finally, in frustration, I said I'd rather do a 15 second sound bite about the journalistic ethics of doing 15 second sound bites on ethical questions. I'm afraid he didn't get my irony.

And what of an earnest television reporter on the panel I spoke of earlier, who informed our audience that she gets one minute, thirty seconds of airtime each day to cover news of the state capitol, and went on to say that too frequently news judgments may be based on hairdos, whose married to whom, and above all, the pursuit of profit. And then, entirely without blushing, she concluded by saying that her station is proudest of its efforts to, and I use her words, "build community and suggest ways in which we can control our lives." I simply am not convinced that you can empower people with one and a half minutes of news about the politics of a state as complicated as California delivered by a "reporter" chosen for his or her hair fashion. Perhaps in New Jersey, I don't know.

In addition to fragmentation, there is the matter of the frames media use. Frames as I use the term are simply the contexts in which a news story is presented. What words are used? What ideas are emphasized? What historical connections are made? What sources are used? What authorities are cited, and so on. In other words, is the savings and loan scam portrayed as an isolated event that was the work of one or two unscrupulous villains, or rather the logical outcome of Reagan's campaign for deregulation and a compliant Congress? Is a family living in a car best dealt with through charity (the Santa Rosans open their hearts frame) or through structural change in society?

One example of how frame analysis works involves an incident many of you may remember. The dominant frame concerning the ice-bound whales in Alaska several years ago might be fairly described as KINDLY HUMANS RESCUE WHALES. (An alternative frame, incidentally, might have been TAX PAYER DOLLARS WASTED IN CRAZY SCHEME TO THWART NATURE WHILE THOUSANDS STARVE.)

Some fascinating recent research by Shanto Iyengar, a young UCLA political scientist, indicates that American national television news overwhelmingly frames poverty stories in terms of individual cases, without relating them to problems in society. One result, which he demonstrated in controlled experiments, is that people exposed to such framing tend to fix responsibility for poverty on the individual--not the society. I hope you can see the implications of such a finding where political decision making is concerned. I for one think such findings may provide an important explanation for why there is so little political pressure in this country to deal with the homeless, or to increase, rather than decrease, assistance to families with dependent children.

A final problem involves emphasis. What do the media emphasize in the news? Disproportionately, the answer is violence, and here I am not just referring to Bruce Willis in "Die Hardest 34". Each day, each moment, our incredibly sophisticated newsgathering technology is turned to the task of vacuuming the world for any terrible occurrence, any unutterable circumstance. As a result, we lose our ability to discern between immediate and imagined danger, and live in a general sense of peril. Why should this matter? One study indicates that the heavy television viewer is far more fearful of the larger world as someone who watches a limited amount. There is no reason to believe that there isn't a similar emphasis in print media with similar effect.

The obvious political consequence of such a generalized fear may be that people become more willing to turn to politicians and political programs that promise safety and ease, but at the same time represent patently undemocratic forces.

Emphasis can also construct a policy agenda that diverts public attention from authentic concerns. For instance, between 1981 and 1986, more stories were broadcast on American evening news programs dealing with terrorism than on poverty, unemployment, racial inequality, and crime combined. (Iyengar, 1992) Yet an American citizen has a considerably better chance, statistically speaking, of being struck by lightning.

Assuming at least for the moment that what I've described is a problem along the lines I've argued, what is the role for the critical thinking teacher other than to strive toward encouraging students in the value and ways of thinking critically? I will single out only one task, although the ways of fulfilling it may be many--and I hope you will share some of yours during the discussion period coming up in a few moments.

The single task that I think most important for the classroom teacher is to examine openly and candidly the notion that this nation is the best informed country in the world, and as a result, the freest. We must find ways to help our students understand that public discourse is not necessarily "free" simply because it is not under direct government control. What I try and help my students understand is that you can undermine or devalue discourse in two different ways. The first is through coercion as was done, for instance, in Eastern Europe under the late, unlamented regimes. The people living there were not encouraged, indeed not allowed to discuss anything of real importance about their lives. Take Romania, for example. All Typewriters had to be registered. The state simply would not allow people to talk openly about their political lives; that is to say, the state would not allow authentic public dialogue or discourse about things that mattered.

But there is a second way that discourse or public dialogue can be undermined just as effectively as if it were outlawed, perhaps even more so simply because we are unaware that it is happening. This second way is through trivilization; through manipulation; through diversion; through demagoguery. In other words, in the ways I've been describing this afternoon. Taken as a whole, I call this means " ***vitiation***", a word that means to debase; impair the quality of; spoil; pervert; to make defective or invalid.

Let me sum up by saying once again that on the scale of my concerns, the general deterioration of contemporary public discourse may be cause for far greater concern than shoddy campaign coverage, per se, although campaign rhetoric itself may be symptomatic of what I've described. As one observer has argued, for instance,

> ...The Bush campaign, like Bush himself, uses words not to convey meaning but as audible confetti....Bush's meandering rhetoric stopped being amusing long ago, when it became recognizably symptomatic of two things. One is the incoherence that afflicts a public person operating without a public philosophy. The other is Bush's belief that he need not bother to discipline his speech when talking to Americans because the business of seeking their consent is beneath him." I should add here, lest you think this is merely the unreasoned political prejudice of an unreconstructed Clinton supporter, that this is the view of George Will, the Bishop of Conservative commentary. (Will, 1992).

What truly bothers me is that instead of the age of information celebrated by so many pundits and academics, we may live in "a moment of deep ignorance", as author and writer for the "New Yorker" Bill McKibben has suggested, a time "when vital knowledge that humans have always possessed about who we are and where we live seems beyond our reach. An UN enlightenment. An age of missing information," in the words of the title of McKibben's wonderful new book. In short, if an informed person is someone who can give good reasons for the choices he or she makes, they are not likely to find them in the modern popular media.

The problem is that each day we are immersed in a media stew of bits and pieces of undifferentiated information, slices of popular culture, and floating images rather than arguments. And then we are asked every four years to make an intelligent judgment about a cast of candidates whose distinguishing characteristics are stylistic rather than the result of authentic value differences. And when we make a botch of it, or refuse to vote at all, as is now the case for the majority of eligible Americans, we are told that we get the politics and the politicians we deserve.

Of course, there is always the argument that the media are simply a business and they are only giving us what we want. Well, yes, television and print journalism are a business. So is selling cotton candy at a carnival. But no one mistakes the vendor's cart for a health food store, which is exactly what we do when we proclaim loudly and proudly that we are the best informed people in the world and, therefore, the most democratic.

If all we can expect from the news media as their contribution to political discourse are slickly presented fragments of the bizarre, sensational and diversionary, then perhaps we should be more modest.

-end-

## Notes

Katz, Jon. "Rock, Rap and Movies Bring You the News," *Rolling Stone*, March 5, 1992, p. 33.

Moyers, Bill. *The New York Times*, March 19, 1992.

Will, George. Syndicated Column, August 4, 1992.

Bernstein, Carl. "Journalism and the Growth of the Idiot Culture," *Guardian Weekly*, June 14, 1992.

*Columbia Journalism Review*, "The New Unreality: When TV reporters don't report," May/June 1992.

MacArthur, John R. Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War, Hill & Wang, 1992.

McKibben, Bill, The Age of Missing Information, Random House, 1992.

Lieberman, "Fake News," *TV Guide*, February 22, 1992.

Schickel, Richard, "A Priest of the Movie Faith," *Time*, February 5, 1990.

Boller, Paul F. Jr., Presidential Campaigns, Oxford University Press, 1984.